

A Cartoon Under Fire
 Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar
 First Unitarian Church
 536 Linton Avenue
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
 513.281.1564
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Does religious dogma have a place in secular society? It is a more challenging question that it appears to be at first glance. Does religious dogma have a place in a secular society? Do people with conservative, fundamentalist, and or evangelical ideas have a right to exist in a secular society? Perhaps another question is; can religious dogma ever really be removed from a secular society without violating the values that secular societies espouse? I am continually reminded that the Puritans came to the United States searching for religious freedom for themselves, not for the local residents who were already here, or for the millions of people who came after them. As people, we seem intimately challenged and driven to segregate and control one another.

Our neighbors in Europe and the Muslim world are having just such an experience. Since the publication of several cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a small Danish, regional newspaper in late September 2005, Muslim – non-Muslim relations have been at a flash point. There is a strong consensus among all Sunni and most Shiite Muslims (whether conservative or liberal) that the Prophet Muhammad, like Allah, should never be visually depicted. This is similar to the traditional Jewish sentiment that the name of God can never be spoken. However, it is quite unlike the Christian tradition of depicting Jesus, Mary, God, and every prophet and Biblical character in art of all kinds. Here we have one problem, most Christians, or people from Christianized countries have no idea that Muhammad is not to be visually depicted, that it is considered rude, blasphemous, transgressive, and sinful to do so.

The original flash from Denmark was small – quieter boycotts of Danish products in the Muslim world followed with Muslim requests for an apology. Kerosene was added to the embers when several major papers in Germany, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, France, and Spain chose to reprint the cartoons just last month, in January 2006. Most papers re-published the cartoons in supposed solidarity with the original Danish paper, and as a symbol of free speech. *France Soir* noted that it published the cartoons to “show ‘religious dogma’ had no place in secular society.”¹

Since then there have been protests and riots in Indonesia (most populous Muslim nation), Bangladesh, Iraq, England, Libya, Pakistan, Gaza, and Malaysia. Gunmen surrounded offices of European Union in Gaza to demand apology. The next day the original Danish paper apologized for printing the cartoons in the first place. The Danish government says they plan to take no actions since their country upholds freedom of speech and the press. Danish flags are regularly burned at protests and an intense boycott of Danish goods continues.

The editor of *France Soir* was fired for his decision to reprint the cartoons. The journalists of *France Soir* then published a statement saying that religious freedom gives people the right to practice a faith but not impose it on others.² Reporters Without Borders released a statement saying that worldwide Muslim response “betrays a lack of understanding” of press freedom as “an essential accomplishment of democracy.”³ The original cartoonists have been living under police protection since 2005 and recently a

¹ www.news.bbc.co.uk, “Muhammad cartoon row intensifies,” February 1, 2006.

² www.news.bbc.co.uk, “French Editor Fired Over Cartoons,” February 2, 2006.

³ www.news.bbc.co.uk, February 2, 2006.

Pakistani cleric announced million-dollar reward for the murder of cartoonists. Earlier in the week 10 or 11 Libyans were killed during protests outside an Italian embassy. Just tonight I saw that violence reached new levels when 15 Christians were murdered in Nigeria, including three children and a priest.

There are many levels of conflict, and a standard in the field of conflict resolution is that conflicts entered into at the level of '3' or above (in a scale of 1 – 5) are often about “taking out” or “defeating” the competition. There is no dialogue, no conversation, no movement. Rather there is slander, violence, a desire to wound and destroy.

I am interested in the decision of the European press to fan the flames and reprint the cartoons under the banner of freedom of speech four months after the initial publication and subsequent problems. Four months seems long enough to know that these cartoons are a tinderbox. The idea that reprinting these cartoons would ever show that “religious dogma has no place in a secular society” is absurd for one reason; secular societies are designed to tolerate religious dogma. You heard me; secular societies are designed to tolerate religious dogma (I didn't say “accept, embrace, convert to, or uplift” I said “tolerate”). They are designed to tolerate dogmas of all kinds unless the dogmas subvert civil order.

Our friends in Europe are having the same problem as the Puritans did 400 years ago, and one we wrestle with in the United States on a regular basis (whether it is over abortion, gay marriage, or stem cell research), the place of religious dogma in a secular society. Religious dogma has an uneasy balance in a secular society, but I know one thing for sure, it belongs here, unless the secular society plans on becoming secularly dogmatic and chasing out opposing views. So I hear in the statement of *France Soir* a sort of hubris, a clever “wiser than thou” attempt to chase religious dogma (in this instance, Islam) out of France, at the expense of France's hard fought and won liberty, equality, and fraternity.

I don't know if the other Western papers were conscious of what they were doing. I'm not sure that *France Soir* was conscious of what they were saying, they just happened to articulate it quite well. And the Muslim world played into their hands so painfully and beautifully on cue with violence than can neither be ignored nor accepted. I am still waiting to hear a major Muslim leader say that violence is not an answer, and not what it means to be a good Muslim.

Secular societies are designed to tolerate dogmas of all kinds unless the dogmas subvert the civil order with protests that turn violent, embassies that are surrounded with armed gunmen, and religious “death warrants” are issued for artists. This is another sign that this conflict was entered into at level '3' or above – everything feels familiar (rioting in the Gaza Strip – you don't say?), everything stays the same (non-Muslims don't understand Muslims and vice versa), nothing moves, and no one learns anything new. Rather, we are all reminded how precarious and dangerous the situation remains. An article from the Washington Post noted, “Those rough cartoons from Denmark were intended to enrage. They do what they set out to do. Published in a bunch, they disrespect the faith.”⁴

The astute see other forces at work as well, racism, classism, colonial history, geo-political power plays, and immigration policies. Some of the worst violence has been in Libya. Ten or eleven Libyans were killed outside an Italian consulate in Libya. Libya is a former Italian colony, a relationship that breeds pain for centuries, even after its demise. Libyans began protesting after a noted anti-immigrant Italian politician flaunted a T-shirt of the cartoons at a public, televised event. He has since resigned and is outraged by the bad behavior of the Libyans.

Violence is a choice and a terrible answer, and we have a flagrantly anti-immigrant politician in a country struggling to accept and integrate immigrants (which is also true of England, France, and Germany). Both of these realities exist on the same plate. Many of these immigrants are well educated Muslims from former colonies, yet they (and even more so their

⁴ www.washingtonpost.com, February 14, 2006.

educated and underemployed children) find little employment, only racism in Europe. Do you remember the riots of the French Muslim suburbs this fall? It is a bitter, marginalized, impoverished pill for the immigrants. And the residents of Europe, by and large, fight the arrival of more immigrants in direct opposition to their republican and democratic values.

I saw twelve of the cartoons on line and what I noticed first was not so much the religious blasphemy (but then again, I grew up Christian, not Muslim), but the inherent racism of them. They had that quality of the dark, sinister “foreigner” in a turban. I thought that one of them was intriguing and shocking in an engaging way that the best cartoons are. But the others felt more like cheap shots. One recent protestor in London carried a banner that read “Free speech, cheap insults.” I agreed with this.

They aren’t great art and they are stereotypical. I asked Professor Eran Kaplan, a Jewish Israeli, from the University of Cincinnati about them and he agreed that they were racist. He also added “Cartoons are based on stereotypes. They are cartoons. It was overblown by everyone. There was manipulation by Syria and Iran and some clerics in Europe. It fits their agenda to incite hatred. It is not a question of free speech. Would they dare do a similar cartoon of a rabbi in the settlements?”

Eran could not accept the Western press excuse and defense of “free speech” because he saw that a taboo was transgressed against Muslims that would not be transgressed in the same way against Jews. As he explained, most major European papers and mainstream Europeans had learned that lesson in WWII. He went on to also note American hypocrisy over the issue, “And what, now the conservative American press are bearers of free speech. Now it is an honor for them to be secular? How would the evangelical right look at cartoons of Jesus as the Anti Christ?” This was something I also immediately noticed. I remember the conservative Christian outrage over the book and 1980’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which depicted Jesus experiencing a vision where he was with Mary Magdalene (very powerful and moving).

When I went looking for the cartoons on line the first and easiest place I found them was on a website entitled *Human Events On-line: A National Conservative Weekly*. It had a byline that read, “exposing liberal bias on college campuses.” On the upper right hand masthead was a flashing offer to purchase the book, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam – buy it now*. On the mid right column was an offer for a book entitled *Whatever It Takes: Illegal Immigration, Border Security, and the War on Terror*. This is no coincidence. The site is a combination of conservative politics, Republican authors with added conservative Christianity. Now why exactly is Human Events trumpeting these cartoons? The conservative press in the United States is masquerading as the defenders of secularism and free speech while taking pot shots at Islam to promote their religious agenda.

Similarly, I was confounded by this response from the United States State Department “Inciting religious or ethnic hatred in this manner is not acceptable. We call for tolerance and respect for all communities and for their religious beliefs and practices.”⁵ What about faith based funding initiatives that discriminate against atheists and homosexuals? What about the White House’s regular use of prayer and invocation of God to insure conservative votes? Are we now to believe that President Bush will be attending *Brokeback Mountain* since he too is a cowboy? With the rise of the radical right I have not felt well respected as a non-Christian.

How is this for inciting religious and ethnic hatred - The United States keeps air bases in Saudi Arabia, the land the houses the holiest site and city for Muslims, Mecca. The United States has geo-political reasons for this use, but it incites an unimaginable level of distrust and hatred in the Muslim world towards the United States.

For all that this most recent struggle entails, the Prophet has been reverently drawn in the past. The Washington Post notes that

⁵ www.cbsnews.com, “US.: Muhammad Cartoon ‘Offensive,’” Feb 14, 2006.

Portrayals of Muhammad are not big or new or common. Most were made for the elite. And most were bound in books . . . old portrayals of Muhammad come from Sunni lands and Shia ones, from the Turkey of the Ottomans, the India of the Mughals, from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. The oldest that survive were painted circa 1300. The newest were produced about 200 years ago.⁶

Museums around the world contain these depictions in their collection, even a museum in secular and Islamic Istanbul. Sayyid Syeed, Secretary General of the Islamic Society of North America notes, “Of course such depictions exist. What is important to remember is that they were never widely available. Had they been, the common people surely would have resented them.”⁷

The cartoons are racist. I am not surprised that they were published once. What surprises me is that they were re-printed. This must have been a conscious and unconscious decision to fan the flames, to make sure the conflict and misunderstanding continues – that police and civilians die, ministers are forced to resign, flags are burned, and angry words are shared. Even in countries with freedom of the press, there is a fine line in what is civil, what promotes civil order, and what upends it. We ignore the line at our peril, particularly with a religion struggling with fundamentalism. It is like pricking an open wound.

An Indonesian ministry official noted, “This is about insensitivity and a trend toward Islamaphobia. As a democratic country we are very aware of press freedom, but we also believe it should not be used to slander or defame sacred religious symbols.”⁸ Not unless the game is the elusive game for total societal power and control, whether secular or dogmatic. It is a game that has never been won in the interests of all.

⁶ www.washingtonpost.com, “In Art Museums, Portraits Illuminate A Religious Taboo,” February 14, 2006.

⁷ www.washingtonpost.com, February 14, 2006.

⁸ Cbsnews.com.